The Polish Brethren: The First Reformed Peace Church & Poland's First Banned Religion

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The Polish Brethren, sometimes also called the Arians, were founded in 1565, when they broke ties with the Calvinist church of Poland. Under the leadership of Peter Gonesius, they established their first congregation in Brzeziny, a village near Łódź.

A rather small, but really unique movement for their time, the Polish Brethren were probably the most radical Reformed church in the commonwealth. As Unitarians, they denounced the Holy Trinity, believing that God is a single entity, and that Jesus was just a man. Arians were also extremely critical of the Papacy, as well as of the clergy in general, calling for the complete separation of state and church.

Arian congregations in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth ca 1573, photo: Wikimedia.org

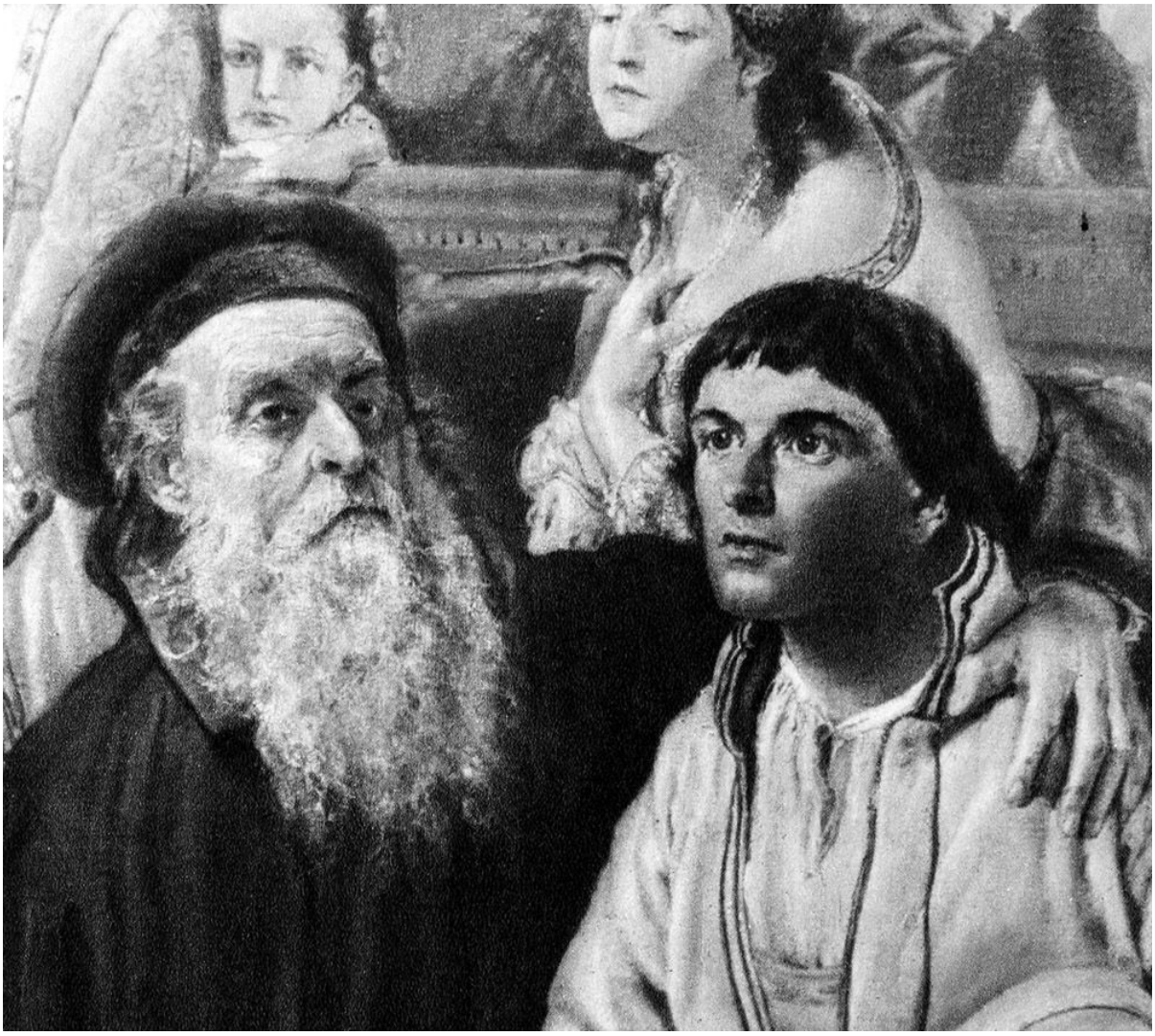
They were one of the first Christian ‘Peace Churches’– even earlier than the widely-known Quakers and the Amish. The doctrine of Peace Churches stresses pacifism as one of the most important teachings coming from the Bible. The Polish Brethren really took that dogma to the extreme – the most radical of them did not accept any state positions, as the state is inseparable from violence. They were also the first advocates against capital and corporal punishment. To highlight their pacifism, many went as far as carrying wooden swords instead of the traditional, and almost obligatory, Polish *szabla*.

So, instead of helping the state, members of the church concentrated on doing something for people at the grassroots level. Many of the 150 congregations that appeared throughout Polish lands offered some kind of education not only for their members, but also from any folk interested. The same was true for the biggest educational accomplishment of the Arians – the Racovian Academy. In its heyday, the university educated over 1000 students of all confessions.

Ruins of the Polish Brethren congregation, Peczelice, photo: Paweł Małecki / AG

However, all these were not what shocked the public the most. What was undoubtedly the most bitter pill to swallow, especially for the ruling nobility, was the Brethren’s stance on social hierarchy in Poland. They were extremely critical of Feudalism and its Polish interpretation, and thus advocated for the enfranchisement of peasants, universal healthcare, and a universal educational system. Many of the landowners among the Brethren went as far as enfranchising the peasants who lived on their property, giving them their own piece of land and releasing them from serfdom.

These teachings were extremely ahead of their times. Poland, and the whole world, had to wait over 200 years for these demands to be repeated – first by Utopian Socialists worldwide, and later, in 1791, by the Polish Constitution of 3rd May.

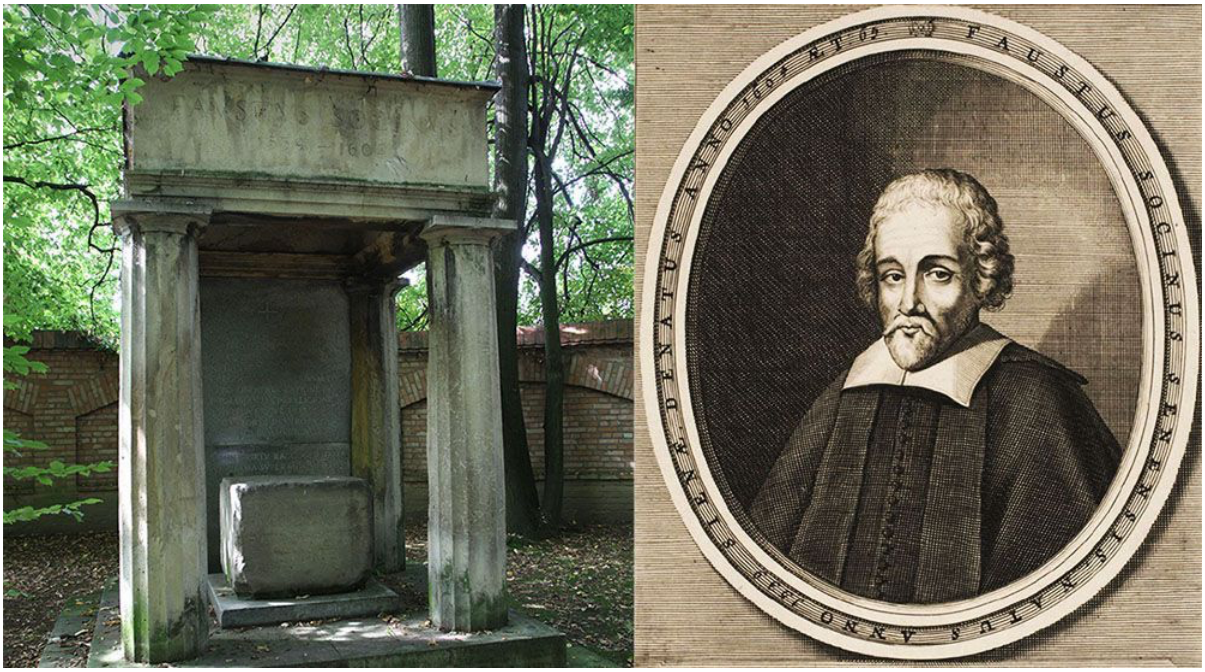


Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, a fragment of 'The Union of Lublin' by Jan Matejko, painting, 1869, reproduction by Piotr Mecik / Forum

During their time in Poland, the Polish Brethren were recognised as one of the most influential intellectuals in the commonwealth, relevant not only in the country, but also abroad. It is estimated that around the year 1620, at the highest point of Polish Arianism, not even 1% of the general population belonged to the Polish Brethren. Artists and intellectuals are a different story – around 20% of them were a part of this movement. Names such as Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, Zbigniew Morsztyn and Wacław Potocki immediately come to mind. The church was also in charge of the Racovian Academy, a university known throughout Europe as 'the Sarmatian Athens'.

Abroad, a really astounding number of intellectuals, especially from Great Britain, read and engaged with the movement. Among the most recognisable, it is impossible not to mention John Milton, who, during his trial in the Rump Parliament in 1652, was accused of being a

member of the religion by Oliver Cromwell. Later on, the writings of Polish Unitarians such as Samuel Przypkowski could be found in the libraries of John Locke and Isaac Newton. Thus, it can be said that the Brethren's theories were one of the foundation stones for the upcoming Enlightenment, influencing, directly or indirectly, the likes of Spinoza, Kant and the American Founding Fathers, as well as Stanisław August Poniatowski and other authors of the first Polish constitution.



19th-century manor & manor park in Lusławice, property of Krzysztof Penderecki, pictured: tombstone of Faust Socyn, an Arian religious reformer, built in the 1930s, designed by Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz, the stone between the columns is a remnant of the original Socyn's tombstone, which was vandalised by local Catholic zealots, photo: Grzegorz Kozakiewicz / Forum; Faust Socyn, chalcography, photo: Wikimedia.org

Unfortunately, as is often the case, the radical ideas of the Polish Brethren eventually caused them to become despised by the majority of Catholic *szlachta* – the Polish nobility. The fact that some of the members of the denomination approved on religious grounds of the Swedish war against the commonwealth in 1655 certainly didn't help either. This, and many other minor disagreements, as well as the growing general dismay towards non-Catholics, eventually led to a situation without precedent in the history of Poland.

In 1658, for the first (and so far last) time, a religion was completely banned within the Polish borders and its members expelled. The decision was extremely divisive among the szlachta, and is seen as the beginning of the decline of the religious freedom the commonwealth was famous for at the time (some people opposed to this decision claimed that it's being done just get their lands so that they could be used as rewards for soldiers who fought against Sweden). The Brethren were given two years to sell their belongings and move, or they could embrace Catholicism and stay. Most of them chose the former, settling mostly in Prussia, the Netherlands, and Transylvania, carrying with them the seeds of the Enlightenment.

Title page of ‘Rozmowy Christiańskie’, collections of Muzeum Regionalne in Pińczów, photo: Wikipedia

That was, however, still not the end of hardships for the Brethren. In the years following their expulsion from Poland, the leading figures of the movement, especially in the Netherlands, decided that the works of theologians and intellectuals connected with the church should be collected and published in one enormous compilation. They eventually did it in 1668. **Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum** was a colossal work of ten volumes which not only presented the most important works of the movement, but also gave brief descriptions of the lives of their authors.

The publication, however, did not go unnoticed by the Catholic church. Ever since the beginning of the Reformation, the policy of Rome was to censor and disallow Protestant writings, since they were considered heretical by Roman Catholics. Thus, in 1674 the book was placed on the **Index Librorum Prohibitorum**, a list of books prohibited by the Catholic church. Not only that, some Catholic theologians went as far as calling it ‘one of the most dangerous publications to Christianity’, together with other classics of philosophy such as Spinoza’s **Tractatus Theologico-Politicus** and Hobbes’ **Leviathan**.

Catechesis by Szymon Budny, Racovian Catechism, photo: Wikipedia

All these controversies and hostility made it extremely difficult for the church to find new members. This fact quickly proved to be their demise. Despite their activity in Transylvania and Prussia, their numbers began dwindling quickly. The last congregation was closed around 1803, less than 250 years after the movement's foundation. More than 100 years later, in 1937, they were revived by Karol Grycz-Śmiałkowski, but it was only in 1967 when they were registered as the Unity of Polish Brethren. Today, the church has congregations in six major Polish cities, and gathers around 230 members.

The history of the Polish Brethren is like a timestamp of the rise and fall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The beginning of the movement marks its golden era, where both parts of the union thrived and prospered. The expulsion of the Brethren marks another important milestone – the end of the golden era and the slow descent towards the Partitions and the union's disappearance from the map.

Written by Adrian Sobolewski, Nov 2017